

# Cycle of Violence Theories and Conflict Resolution in the Post-Yugoslav States

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the implementation of non-governmental programs in the post-Yugoslav states. Current conflict resolution initiatives are informed by theories of deviancy and the idea of cycles of violence. The presumption of such programs is that conflict has resulted from a culture of violence. Whilst some non-governmental organisations have expressed doubts about the effectiveness of their peace education work, the reasons for the problems they experience are often misunderstood. One reason that is never addressed is that people from the region are already familiar with the concept of peace education, but have seen it fail. Ironically postwar Yugoslavia was very important in the development of the field of peace education and was held up as a model of ethnic conflict management for other countries to follow.*

## Précis

*Cet article examine la mise en place de programmes non-gouvernementaux dans les états de l'ex-Yougoslavie. Les initiatives actuelles en matière de résolution de conflit s'inspirent des théories de la déviance et de la notion de cycle de la violence. Les programmes en question supposent donc que le conflit est la résultante d'une culture de la violence. Un certain nombre d'organisations non-gouvernementales ont pourtant exprimé leurs doutes sur l'efficacité du présent travail d'éducation à la paix, mais les problèmes auxquelles elles font face sont souvent mal compris. Une des*

*causes non nommée de ce fait est que les habitants des régions sont déjà familiers avec le concept d'éducation à la paix, mais pour en avoir observé l'échec. Il est ironique de constater que la Yougoslavie d'après-guerre joua un rôle très important dans le développement du champs de l'éducation à la paix et fut érigée en modèle à suivre par les autres pays en matière de gestion des conflits ethniques.*

*Only a reconstruction effort which gives due priority to the well-being of the populations and address[es] as crucial issues: the psychosocial recovery of the younger generations; the building-up of an education system capable of promoting the development of the child's personality and preparing him or her for a responsible life; the reform of social services structures which will increase their efficiency and limit their cost can foster long term stability in the region. (UNICEF 1995, 2)*

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has announced that it hopes to repatriate twenty thousand refugees to Bosnia and Herzegovina by December 1997. In the meantime, Eastern Slavonia is to be re-integrated into Croatia. This means that it is seen as imperative to re-establish peaceful relations between the different ethnic groups to avoid a renewal of fighting.

Nonviolent conflict resolution programs are very popular with international donors and more have been introduced to facilitate the reintegration of refugees and to prevent a renewal of fighting in the post-Yugoslav states. UNICEF and other internationally-funded initiatives are endorsing a predominantly psychological approach to conflict resolution. This ap-

proach is informed by the Western welfare model which has traditionally emphasised the role of the professional and, therefore, individual causations and interventions, and de-emphasised the influence of the wider social, economic, political and cultural circumstances (Boyden 1990, 192).

Since the end of the Cold War the focus of policymakers has shifted away from fears of confrontation between two superpowers to preoccupations about "failed states" and domestic peace, particularly following the Oklahoma bombing. The domestic concerns of donor countries about the breakdown of the family and a growth of violence are being projected onto how international problems are conceptualized.

The culture or cycle of violence thesis has been described as "undoubtedly the most frequently mentioned theoretical framework in the literature on family violence" (Pagelow 1984, 223). It is often assumed that children who have experienced or witnessed violence "grow up to become juvenile delinquents/criminals and/or abusers/victims of violence" (ibid.). We can see parallels in the concept of abusing families as suffering from an underlying pathology passed on from generation to generation in many of the current theories of ethnic conflict that is commonly seen as deriving from age-old conflicts. Anthony Smith looks to the culture of particular groups to explain conflict and claims that "it is in the properties of such (ethnic) communities that one can find the key to the explosive power of nationalism" (Smith 1993, 49). Seyom Brown (1994) draws parallels with violent families and nations and sees the problem of violence as learned behaviour:

Explicitly or implicitly, groups (from families to gangs to nations) convey to their members what kind of

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conflictual or cooperative behaviour is admired or disparaged, and such group norms can work or reinforce, channel, or deflect aggressive desires to dominate others or to strike out at those believed to be responsible for one's deprivations and frustrations. (Brown 1994, 19).

Marc Howard Ross (1993, xiv) states, "Violence, I am convinced is most likely to produce more violence." He calls for the recognition of "the central role of psychocultural sources of conflict."

The Report of the Commission on Global Governance (1995, 49) argues, "At a broader level, the security of people is imperilled by the culture of violence that has infected many societies." It is feared that children who are victims of war have grown up in a culture of violence and that they are more likely to become future perpetrators of violence:

A disturbing feature of the contemporary world is the spread of a culture of violence. Civil wars brutalize thousands of young people who are drawn into them ... Conflict and violence also leave deep marks on the lives of children, innocent victims who are rarely able to rid themselves of the legacy of war. The culture of violence is perpetuated in everyday life ... The world over, people are caught in vicious circles of disrespect for the life and integrity of others. (ibid., 16-17)

UNICEF's *News in Brief* states that "the world has only just begun to realise that left untreated, the psychological wounds of war can be most damaging, as children grow up unable to function normally, often driven to perpetuate the violence they have experienced."

The victims of war are seen as the future perpetrators of war. The idea of the need for moral rehabilitation has led UNICEF to define new policy areas, "Best practise in the context of psychosocial counselling; how to demobilize and detraumatize child soldiers; how to deal with conditions of social breakdown in the 'failed state'" (Black 1996, 272). Intervention is called for to try to break the cycle of violence.

Many organisations have adopted an unquestioning and pragmatic attitude towards the cycle of violence thesis. As Daley Pagelow (1984, 224) has reasoned:

It *sounds* intuitively reasonable, if it transmits an emotional appeal to masses of people, even if not factually accurate, what harm can be the harm? If the phrase "cycle of violence" raises money for child-abuse organizations or other humanitarian causes—why not use it—whether or not it has been substantiated?

It should be noted that despite the popularity of intervention based on the idea of cycles of violence theories, there is a lack of research to prove the theories. Daley Pagelow has highlighted the "shaky evidence" to support the cycle of violence theories, "Most writers have done no original research but have gathered reports in the field and repeated findings and assumptions from these secondary sources," (Pagelow 1984, 225) and "at this point, there is no scientifically sound empirical evidence that there is a causal relationship between being an abused child and becoming an adult child abuser" (ibid., 254).

There is also a lack of studies to support the cycle of violence thesis in the context of conflict. Guy Goodwin Gill and Ilene Cohn (1994, 174) admit in their study on child soldiers that "no systematic study appears to have been conducted into the relationship between the way children cope with exposure to violence and future choices ..." and that "research is inconclusive ... as to the likelihood of moral breakdown among children who actively participate in political violence and armed conflict."

This concern about moral breakdown and the need to rehabilitate the child underlies Article 39 of the Convention that requires states to "take all appropriate measures to promote the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim." Counselling to promote recovery and reintegration has become very popular in the United States and Britain and this is reflected in UN and

northern NGO programs, although the benefits of counselling have been questioned. King and Trowell (1992, 26) contend, "Unfortunately no amount of counselling and psychotherapy is likely to make much impact on families suffering from multiple problems associated with poverty." The limitations of counselling refugees are even clearer among whose lives are, by definition, "insecure and unstable" and have obvious practical problems, such as a lack of housing.

The prevalence of counselling or other initiatives to empower individuals from parenting to anti-bullying classes have been condemned domestically as an avoidance of tackling socioeconomic problems. They have been described as often "directed at radically altering the attitudes of young working class people" and have been linked to the underclass thesis which "is increasingly shaping US and UK social policy" (Jefferis and Smith 1994, 21-22).

The medicalization of social problems internationally has also been criticised. Jo Boyden questions the trend towards a universal diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in those who have survived wars and the pathologizing of children's experiences in war (Boyden 1994). She cites research which indicated the "astounding plasticity" of children in extremely stressful situations and other research where it was found that trauma was lessened when adults or children felt that they had some control over events. Aggressive responses, which Boyden points out are often linked to survival mechanisms, are condemned by UNICEF psychologists as being dangerous (ibid., 261). A local psychiatrist in Knin working with refugee children told me that she believed it to be wrong to try to "cure" children of such symptoms as hyper-alertness when they were in a war situation. She felt that alertness helped children avoid danger. Attempting to rid children near the front line of the symptoms, she said, was damaging to their future recovery as it confused them as they had every reason to be

afraid. Her reasoning was confirmed by the fact that just six weeks later, in August 1995, she and the refugee children she had been treating fled Krajina because of the Croatian Operation Storm offensive.

Derek Summerfield of the Medical Foundation for the Victims of Torture is also critical of the emphasis on trauma programs with donors and international agencies which he describes as the "reproduction of the colonial status of the Third World mind" (*BBC World Service*, 11 April 1996). The popularity of psychosocial programs reached their height in Croatia and Bosnia in 1994. Since then there has been a retreat from funding psychosocial programs there but there has been a growth of such programs in Serbia. However, the general shift of funding away from psychosocial programs does not represent a shift away from a focus on the Third World mind or culture as being the problem. Even traditional relief and development NGOs have shifted the focus of their work. Oxfam is now involved in conflict prevention/mitigation work in Sarajevo and intends to expand its work in this field.

UNESCO in March 1994 set up its Culture for Peace Program that was based on the idea that following war, the whole of society needed to be re-programmed out of a culture of violence, the director-general of UNESCO indicatively referring to the "rehabilitation" of a country after war, not its reconstruction (UNESCO, Paris, 7-8 July 1993). Whereas past Western missionaries spoke of the need to civilise the natives, today's aid workers speak of the need to promote tolerance and peaceful conflict resolution skills. UNESCO's Culture of Peace Program which sees the wars in El Salvador, Mozambique and former Yugoslavia as being the result of a culture of violence epitomises how such attitudes towards the Third World are expressed in today's politically correct language. Whilst UNESCO is keen to emphasise that a culture of peace cannot be imposed from outside, and its programs stress they are derived from

local cultures and traditions, the presumption of the programs is that the culture of the particular country is the problem. International agencies like UNESCO are seen as necessary "to play a new invigorated role in the United Nations system in the active promotion as well as conceptualization of a culture of peace to replace the culture of violence and war."

There are many internationally-funded projects to instill civilised values into both children and adults. *Hi Neighbour*, a program of social integration and psychological support for traumatised children aims "to cultivate their tolerance of differences" and "to develop strategies for peaceful resolution of conflicts and for prevention of social conflicts" (undated report).

UNICEF and other organisations seem to have forgotten or be unaware that the promotion of good relations between the different peoples of Yugoslavia and the celebration of their cultures was integral to the school curriculum in former Yugoslavia. Therefore, peace education programs are not new and something that Yugoslavia was not only familiar with but led the field. However peace education and policies to instill tolerance are seen as having failed to stop the war. The problem of such initiatives is that they do not address the issues at the heart of the conflict. In Serbia, worsening relations between the local population and refugees since 1993 has had nothing to do with ethnic differences (as the majority of the refugees there are ethnic Serbs), but has been linked to the impoverishment of the population as a whole. The fighting in north-western Bosnia between the Muslim-led Bosnian government forces and the Muslim forces under Fikret Abdic illustrates that the conflict did not relate to simply a failure to respect cultural differences.

Through this approach, the causes of wars are trivialized and the international context is ignored. Instead, explanations are sought in the pathology of the people. However detailed research such as Tone Bringa's study of a mixed Muslim-Croatian village in

Bosnia from 1987 to 1993 demonstrates that the reasons for the outbreak of war in Yugoslavia cannot be found within communities. Bringa (1995, 5) argued that her study of the village could not explain the war in Bosnia, "for the simple reason that the war was not created by those villagers" and that "the war has been orchestrated from places where the people I lived and worked among were not represented and where their voices were not heard."

Moreover for all the peace education initiatives in former Yugoslavia, the use of force is seen as having been the actual way of dealing with conflict. Whilst people may have been involved in internationally funded nonviolent conflict resolution programs, they have witnessed military force as being the way disputes are ultimately resolved. It was the power of the US military, demonstrated by the NATO bombing of Bosnian Serb positions, not nonviolent conflict resolution initiatives, that resulted in the Dayton Agreement. Ironically, nationalist leaders in the successor states have been keen to be seen to be enthusiastic about nonviolent conflict resolution initiatives. Nationalist leaders have been attempting to recast themselves as upholding multicultural values and implicitly blame ordinary people for nationalism to enhance, or in Serbia's case, turn around their international standing.

Whole schools of children are being put on trauma or rehabilitation programs as a matter of course even if they have not been traumatised by the war. There is a presumption that in the absence of such programs children are growing up to be aggressive and intolerant. However, surveys carried out contradict this view. For example, a survey of three Belgrade primary schools by the Institute of Pedagogy found that young people did not identify with war figures (*Politika*, 6 March 1995, 55). They chose American basketball players or film stars as their heroes. They were against the war and saw it as ruining their childhood and said it was not important whether people were Serb or Croat etc.

It should be emphasised that programs to rehabilitate children have not been confined to Serbia, which has been considered the aggressor in the war. Such programs have been more numerous in the Federation parts of Bosnia and in Croatia. The emphasis given to such programs has led to unease. The psychologist Zorica Trikić, involved in UNICEF's trauma counselling for children, has expressed concern that it seemed as if it were forgotten that the problem was not the children (*Vreme*, 26 September 1994, 25). The underlying assumption seems to be that the children of the region are (potential) delinquents lacking moral guidance who need to be reclaimed.

It is worth recalling the condemnation of such paternalistic attitudes towards the Third World by Paulo Freire (1972, 39) who was so influential in UNESCO in the 1960s and 1970s:

They see the Third World as the incarnation of evil, the primitive, the devil, sin and sloth—in sum, as historically unviable without the director societies. Such a Manichean attitude is at the source of the impulse to “save” the “demon-possessed” Third World, “educating” it and “correcting its thinking” according to the director societies’ own criteria.

Freire did not think that the dominant powers could play the positive role that they are now sought to have, describing it as “a contradiction in terms if the oppressors not only defended but actually implemented a liberating education” (Freire 1978, 30).

UN agencies are aware that there is hostility to the idea that the problems of such states are cultural, are considered by Third World countries to have racist undertones, and contain echoes of nineteenth century imperial missions to civilise the natives. As one refugee from Bosnia resentfully told me, “Just because I come from a country at war, doesn't mean that I'm uncivilised.”

UNICEF (1993) has privately acknowledged that

the topic is also a sensitive and controversial issue in many countries and therefore, public information

and media relations are critical both in raising awareness and advocacy, and also in avoiding misunderstandings that can damage organizational relationships and affect the public image of UNICEF.

Whilst UNICEF sees its Education for Development as promoting global solidarity, describing it as providing “an unthreatening means of bridging North and South and (East and West), and donor and recipient” (UNICEF 1992, 10), such programs actually end up legitimising the distinction made between donor and recipient countries. For example, UNICEF's Development for Education in Western countries envisages that children may grow up to be “decision makers and potential donors” (*ibid.*, 15). This and other programs encourage volunteers from Western countries to go to Eastern European or African countries, but there is no parallel encouragement or funding of Eastern European or African youth to work as volunteers instilling tolerance and democratic values in Western children.

As these programs illustrate, intervention focuses increasingly on changing culture or individual behaviour and individual relations. However, the problems of the region did not arise at the level of the individual, nor can they be put down to culture, or have solutions aimed at without taking into account the wider political, economic and international context. Moreover, the idea that the problems of the post-Yugoslav states or other states in the Third World are cultural is reinforcing a North-South or East-West divide that cannot promote conflict resolution or assist the plight of refugees in the long-term. ■

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